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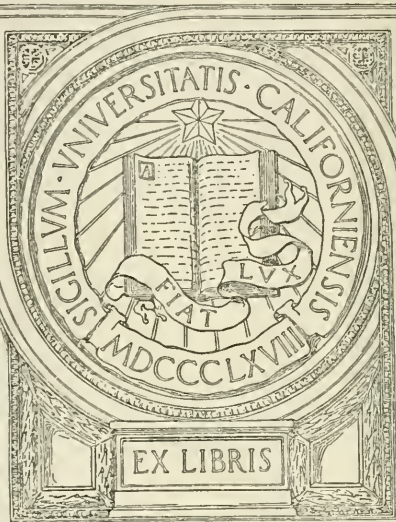


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# Political Prophecies

· AN ADDRESS

to the

EDINBURGH PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Delivered Nov. 5 1918

BY

The Right Hon. H. A. L. FISHER, M.P.

*Price One Shilling net*

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## POLITICAL PROPHECIES

THE great perturbation of human affairs which the world has experienced during the past four years has given rise in every region of society to a vague expectation of change. In whatever direction we turn, whether we listen to the voices of the crowd in our own streets or to the murmurs which float in upon us from India or Arabia, from the Siberian Plains, or the sunlit coasts of the Pacific, we hear the same multitudinous hum of vague expectancy. The great war will usher in a new era, create a new society, replace old ideals by new ideals, establish the human family on a new basis, draw the lines of states upon a plan dictated by reasoned foresight, and once and for all eliminate the poisons which infect the body politic of Europe and those other parts of the habitable world which have fallen under European influence and control. Unless statesmanship and morality are alike bankrupt, the tragedy of such a war as this must not recur. Schemes are drawn up for a regenerate Europe, for a purified and pacified world. Belief in progress is too deep-rooted to admit of our seeing in this European cataclysm nothing but a great retrogression, only by long and painful struggles to be retrieved. The greater the obvious calamity, the more determined are we to read into it a presage of benefits commensurate with the unchallenged and palpable evil. Never have the prophets been more active. Never since the great age of Messianic expectation has the

human race been so much absorbed with the dark prospect of the future.

The phantom host from Archangel who marched through England on its way to Belgium during the autumn of 1914 reminds us of a fact, long known to the historians of religion, that beliefs are more often proportionate to desire than to evidence, and that if we only wish for a thing to happen with sufficient intensity, we may easily persuade ourselves that the object of our desire will be, or even has been, fulfilled. It follows that, if we wish to estimate the aptitude of the present age for framing a correct forecast of the future, allowance must be made for this source of error. Sentiment obscures the judgement, passion clouds the vision. We refuse to admit that any prospect which seems to us to be odious and incompatible with a benignant scheme of the universe can in fact be possible. In the same gallant spirit of optimism, with hopes hardly more exuberant and measureless, Condorcet, the condemned prisoner of the Jacobin tyranny, composed his grand design for the future of a perfected humanity.

The materials for exact political forecast have been vastly improved since the French Revolution. We know more about the world in which we live, and are in a better position to gauge the forces which move it. Our statistics are more complete, our knowledge of the past is fuller; we have acquired, through the influence of the public press and of democratic institutions, a more perfected and better schooled habit of political calculation. Certain vital factors affecting the growth and prosperity of nations, which were hardly appreciated by statesmen and publicists a hundred years ago, are

now the common property of political observation. We can clearly predict, with a tolerable degree of accuracy, the life of a mine, and in time our geological surveys should enable us to forecast the development of all the mineral resources of a nation. We are, indeed, learning to estimate national power, not in terms of acres and square miles, but of iron ore and potash, of rubber and petroleum, of water-power and coal, of canals and textiles. We cast the horoscope of states, peoples, and races by a study of comparative birth-rates, death-rates, emigration rates, and by such means essay to detect some of the larger features of the coming world; such as the growing urgency of the Yellow Races, or the diminishing share of the Roman Catholic Church in the conduct of the world's affairs.

But although our arms have gained in precision, the factors to be assessed have increased in number and complexity. In place of the isolated rivalries of the past, we are now faced with struggles in which the whole habitable globe is either directly or indirectly involved. The problems have become so vast, their solution depends upon a forecast of so many improbable and concurrent factors, upon so vast a complexus of doubtful contingencies, that statesmanship, which should be all prescience, has become three parts guess-work. What statesman in 1914 could have predicted that the European War would last four years, that it would lead to the capture of Jerusalem or Bagdad by British armies, bring about the collapse of the Russian Tsardom, throw Finland into the arms of Germany, and cast the weight of the American Republic into the scale against the Central Powers? For all our instruments of pre-

cision, our statistics, our historical and economic knowledge, our trained and experienced statesmen, we did not foresee any one of these events. I do not say that these occurrences ought not and should not have been predicted. Good modern historians, had they brought their knowledge up to date, which they very seldom permit themselves to do, might have regarded each one of these occurrences in the light of a probability. The fact, however, remains that none of these things were predicted, and that the whole course of the military and political evolution of the world during the last few years has been full of surprise even for those who are paid to be prescient.

To the mind of the ancients the experience of such great and unexpected changes in the disposition of the world, as those which are familiar to our own generation, suggested the play of a capricious Fortune or Providence, of whom little else could be predicated save a delight in confounding the anticipations of mankind. In recounting the last agonies of the Macedonian Empire, Polybius reminds his readers that the fall of the Macedonians was foretold by Demetrius of Phalerum a hundred and fifty years before, in a prophecy so remarkable as to deserve the name of inspiration. It is clear, however, that there is nothing in this prediction which we should now regard as evidence of distinguished prescience. While recounting the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great, Demetrius was naturally moved to comment upon the sudden obliteration of a powerful empire by a people, only fifty years earlier, unimportant and obscure. Who would have predicted such a revolution? It was clearly one of Fortune's favourite para-

doxes, and not the last of them, for it was only to be expected that the same inscrutable Providence which had placed the Macedonians in the seat of pre-eminence would one day elect to withdraw its favours. In all this there is no profound philosophy. Demetrius does not attempt to assign a cause for the future downfall of the Macedonians, but is content to argue from his knowledge of the habits of Fortune that their empire was no more designed for immortality than the famous Persian polity which the sword of the Macedonian conqueror had humbled to the dust.

It is the more remarkable that Polybius should go out of his way to exalt this vague prediction, seeing that of all the historians of antiquity he is himself most noticeable for the true prophetic quality. Living in an age of astounding political revolutions, he has a keen eye for the large lines and decisive points of history. He sees the great fact of the rise of the Roman Empire in its true significance, assigns it to its true causes, and is prompt to realize that the Roman conquests have woven all the scattered threads of Mediterranean history into a single indissoluble whole. The duel between Rome and Carthage is presented in its genuine lineaments, at once as the collision between two incompatible types of polity and as the turning-point in the fate of the civilized world. The son of the Achaean Lycortas and the friend of Scipio Aemilianus had no illusions as to the decadence of Greece and as to the enduring ascendancy of Rome. A long life consumed in war, politics, hunting, study, and travel had taught him the secret of the decline and fall of states. He notes the depopulation of the Greek cities, as a consequence of

self-indulgence and a cause of decay, comments on the way in which the Macedonian conquests contributed to the spread of luxurious tastes among the simple Romans, and argues that some day in the revolution of things conquest will bring its own nemesis, and that the brilliant world-state, the swift creation of which was the arresting fact of his own times, would be brought to the dust through the moral enervation of success.

For many centuries these passages of solemn warning must have seemed to the Roman readers of Polybius to be idle words. The Republic was succeeded by the Empire; the Eagles of the Empire were planted on the Tees and the Tigris, and the decline of this imposing polity, which, next to its rise, is the greatest event in world-history, was spread over so long a space of time and accompanied by means so gradual and complex, that the real significance of the vast changes which produced the mediaeval out of the ancient world was never distinctly apprehended by contemporaries. Ammianus Marcellinus, the soldier historian of the fourth century, comes nearest to the truth in the spirited narrative recording the decadence of Roman society and the formidable pressure of the barbarian tribes upon the fabric of the Empire. But though dimly conscious of impending fate, Ammianus never nerves himself to look into its stern and pitiless eyes. The Roman Empire for him belongs to the eternal order of the Universe; and the same spirit of fatalism, running through all the political speculation of the Middle Ages, prevented any just estimate of the measure and quality of the political transformations which were steadily breaking up the unity of the ancient world.



Another great historical event, the falling away of the American colonies from their allegiance to England, had been considered probable by many acute observers for a generation before it actually occurred. In France, where the wish was naturally father to the thought, Montesquieu gave it as his opinion as early as 1730 that England would be the first nation to be abandoned by her colonies, and similar predictions were subsequently made by D'Argenson, Turgot, and Vergennes. Montesquieu's argument was based upon the view that the colonist would not continue to tolerate the irksome fiscal restraints imposed by the mother country; but another and even stronger argument was supplied by a reflection as to the probable consequences of a British conquest of French Canada. In 1748 the Swedish traveller Kahn was told, not only by native Americans but by English emigrants, that within thirty or fifty years the English colonies in America might constitute a separate Republic entirely independent of England, and was persuaded that the neighbourhood of the French colony was the chief power making for the maintenance of a union which had long ceased to be grounded on any foundation of friendly sentiment. And as the Seven Years' War proceeded it was an opinion common in France, and not altogether unrepresented in England, that the loss of Canada to the French would usher in the defection of the American colonies from Great Britain.

The French Revolution presents a case of an event confidently and frequently predicted, but ill-measured and ill-judged when it actually occurred. It is, however, worthy of remark that the sense of impending

revolution was more acute during the despotic anarchy of Louis XV's reign than in the years immediately preceding the catastrophe. In the earlier period even a foreigner like Lord Chesterfield was impressed by the presence of all the symptoms of approaching change and revolution, and D'Argenson's Journals between 1740 and 1756 are full of the same apprehension; but as the long uneasy reign of Louis XV came to a natural end, and the ancient monarchy of France was found to have safely survived its period of disorder and humiliation and to be refurnished with a stock of good intentions, the presentiment of impending evil died away. Mr. Lecky points out that neither Franklin nor Frederick the Great, both of whom had special reasons or special opportunities for watching French affairs, had any glimpse of the approaching downfall of the monarchy, and it is a curious fact that in the voluminous correspondence of Madame Roland, who from the very first played an energetic part in French revolutionary politics, there is not a single allusion to current or future politics before the storm burst in 1789.

In general, the Revolution was judged in its initial stages with a light-hearted optimism, shared even by the gravest of German metaphysicians. The most profound diagnosis was supplied by Burke, whose warm and splendid imagination, upon this as upon other occasions, threw shafts of golden light into the obscurity of the future. Political philosophers are not famous for divination, seeing that even Aristotle, for all his opportunities at the court of Alexander, failed to detect the future of the Nation State, but Burke belongs to that small group of political thinkers among whom



must be reckoned Polybius, De Tocqueville, Treitschke, and Seeley, whose minds are quickened to the large impending issues of the future. We do not remember him so much for his detailed predictions, though he predicted the loss of the American colonies through the fiscal policy of the British Government, as from the fact that he was the first Englishman to envisage in its true promise and potency the growing polity of the North American States, the first to bring the peoples of India in a living shape to the minds of the distant mother nation who had drifted into the position of governing them, and the first to grasp the tremendous depth and devastating range of the French Revolution. Burke's estimate of the French Revolution is open to many criticisms, but in three respects he proved himself to be the best kind of political prophet, travelling to the right conclusions by a well-laid course of reasoning from the facts before him. He was right in holding that a movement, springing not from a miscellany of opportunist calculations but from a coherent body of political doctrine having all the quality of religious faith, could not be confined to France alone, that it would spread through Europe like a flame, and that all the conservative elements in European society were concerned to resist it. He was right again in his view that the civil constitution of the clergy would constitute an irreparable breach between the new society and the old, and that the destruction of the privileges and independence of the Gallican Church would lead the way to a more highly centralized State. Finally, he was right in predicting that all this tumult and turmoil would end in a military despotism. In all these respects

Burke was led to the right conclusion by the employment of a sound method, and when we consider that these declarations were made in the autumn of 1790, before the fall of the monarchy, before the outbreak of war, and before the rise of the Jacobins, they must be acknowledged to be among the most remarkable documents of human prescience in the sphere of political speculation.

Pitt's false prophecy that the end of the Papacy was in sight must be set off against the astonishing prediction (if indeed it be authentic) that Napoleon would meet with his ultimate check through a national rising in Spain. Napoleon's oracle, 'Europe will be either Cossack or Republican', has not yet been realized, but another vaticination was more successful: he divined that France would soon tire of the Bourbons, and that, in spite of Waterloo, there was still a chance for his dynasty.

These are the predictions of statesmen. For the higher gifts of divination which depend upon an insight into the fundamental moral forces and aspects of the world, Wordsworth was superior to either Pitt or Napoleon. From the first he divined in the Spanish rising the presence of a fresh power in Europe, calculated to frustrate the designs of French Imperialism. His picture of the degraded condition of the boy operative in a cotton-mill might have been cited without irrelevance in all the denunciations of the half-time system from the date of the publication of *The Excursion* in 1814 until the abolition of the system by the passage of the Education Act in the present year. The evils of industrialism, the establishment of a national system

of compulsory education, the dangers of the illustrated press, are all foretold in the books of his prophetic statesmanship. On such matters he felt deeply, and therefore without extravagance, which is always shallow. Nobody with a decent mind desires to see the scenery of his home spoiled by the intrusion of railroads or factory chimneys, and Wordsworth in 1844 wrote a well-known sonnet against the projected Kendal and Windermere railway—but that commonplace objection was not the only word which Wordsworth had to say on railways. In an earlier sonnet, composed during a tour in the summer of 1833, he had foreseen that the spread of industrialism would not be fatal to poetry, but that poetry would absorb industrialism and turn it to its own spiritual uses :

Nor shall your presence, howso'er it mar  
The loveliness of Nature, prove a bar  
To the Mind's gaining that prophetic sense  
Of Future change, that point of vision, whence  
May be discovered what in soul ye are.

lines equally premonitory of Turner's 'Rain, Steam, and Speed', and of Verhaeren's *Villes tentaculaires*.

The larger and more impressive tendencies of modern history have been too unmistakable to escape the notice of competent observers, though even the most sagacious have erred in their estimate as to the time at which or the mode in which a particular change was to be accomplished. In so far as it is based upon an intellectual process at all, a political prediction is nothing more than an historical generalization, varying in exactitude with the knowledge and acumen of the prophet. From his insight into the nature and historical antecedents of the

German people Heine was well advised in warning the French in 1834 that they must not be deceived by mild-eyed philosophies, but that one fine day the old heathen gods of Germany would rise from their graves, and Thor with his giant hammer set to work upon Gothic cathedrals. A feeling of national pride, stimulated by the stirring achievements of his race, led an Elizabethan poet to predict in the year 1602 the spread of the English language over the world :

Who in time knows whither we may vent  
The treasure of our tongue? To what strange  
    shores  
This gain of our best glory shall invent  
To enrich the unknowing nations with our stores?  
What worlds in the yet unformed occident  
May come refined with accents that are ours?

Yet Bacon thought that his Essays would survive rather in their Latin than in their English garb, and, long after Bacon and Daniel were laid in their graves, Gibbon, doubting the appeal of his own language, wrote an early work on the History of Switzerland in French, as the tongue likely to secure for it the greatest circulation among polite readers. The incident is also memorable as the occasion of a striking prediction. Hume, to whom the manuscript was submitted, recommended the author to use his native English in words which show a real intellectual grasp of the future. 'Let the French', he wrote, 'triumph in the present diffusion of their tongue. Our solid and increasing establishments in America, where we need less dread the inundation of Barbarians, promise a superior stability and duration to the English language.' Advice of uncommon

sagacity which the recipient of the letter was wise enough to follow.

In making predictions as to the future of his own country a prophet is helped by a great mass of instinctive, as well as of acquired, knowledge which is not available when he attempts to generalize as to the future course of foreign States. The knowledge possessed by the inhabitants of any one country as to the social and political conditions of any other country is almost always so imperfect and superficial that popular generalizations upon foreign peoples and foreign policies go, for the most part, wildly astray. In the later part of the eighteenth century it was the accepted view upon the continent of Europe that England was a decadent power, a sort of 'insular Poland'—selfish, corrupt, torn by factions, without nerve or consistency, fast tottering to a bankrupt's grave. 'It is very easy', wrote Rousseau in 1760, 'to see that twenty years hence England will be ruined, and furthermore will have lost her liberty', a view not confined to men of letters but widely held in Courts and Cabinets. Thus Joseph II of Austria declared that England was fallen wholly and for ever, that she had become a second-class power like Sweden and Norway, and was probably destined to fall under the sway of Russia; and judgements equally unfavourable were passed upon us by Catharine II of Russia and by Frederick II of Prussia. Indeed there was upon the Continent during the years preceding the wars of the Revolution and the Empire an undervaluation of British power and resources as serious and misleading as that which prevailed in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century. In each case enormous

policies, affecting the whole future of the world, were based on insufficient knowledge and false estimates of the future.

Of the governing tendencies of the modern world by far the most important is the spread of democracy, and the literature which has grown up round democratic institutions is as voluminous as the importance of the subject demands. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that many leading features of modern democracy were wholly unforeseen by the men who first undertook to enlighten the world upon the subject. The political writers at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries wrote and thought of democracy in terms coloured, if not dictated, by memories of classical antiquity. Even the founders of the American constitution, who were not theorists but practical statesmen, failed to foresee some of the most important features of American social life and constitutional development. They laboured under the delusion that because simplicity and equality had been the marks of the ancient Republic, and were certainly features of the social conditions then prevailing in the colonies, these qualities would permanently belong to the gigantic State which it was their office to create. They foresaw neither the large fortunes nor the huge and dominating Trusts which have given the ply to American institutions, and in general they were precluded, by reason of the fact that all previous experience of democracies had been confined to small States, from apprehending the way in which the problem of popular rule would work itself out in the immense framework of the American Republic. The political boss, the Nominating



Convention, and all the unseen arts of management without which the new machine could not be effectually worked, were quite beyond the apprehension of the members of the Philadelphia Convention, and if Alexander Hamilton could have lived to see the day when it could be truthfully said that 'the man who designates the delegates to the Nominating Convention is really the most powerful man in the United States, and that everybody but a President in his second year is at his mercy', he would have been the first to confess that the fabric of the Federal Constitution had undergone a profound change which no one of his contemporaries did in fact predict or could have been expected to infer from the available evidence before him.

Among the early observers of the democratic institutions of the New World, De Tocqueville is fullest of the prophetic spirit. In 1833 he saw the main characteristics of democratic civilization with all the clairvoyance of temperamental dislike. Many of the defects which he noted as present in American society, and regarded to be incidental to democratic civilization in general, have been mitigated by the sobering influences of history, though it would be rash to say that they are not still perceptible both in America and in other democratic countries. He may have overrated the extent to which subservience to public opinion, jealousy of personal eminence, blind acquiescence in vulgar standards, are to be counted as permanent qualities in democratic society, but that every such society is specially susceptible to these charges is probably true. Mill, whose sympathies were on the side of democracy, thought that if De Tocqueville had lived

to know what the New England States had become thirty years after, he would have acknowledged that much of the unfavourable part of his anticipations had not been realized.<sup>1</sup> However this may be, De Tocqueville certainly estimated aright the true proportions of the colour problem, and in effect predicted the American Civil War. It is also part of his claim to greatness to have explained to Europe that democracy was a form of civilization rather than a form of government, and that the world was entering on a democratic age. The full significance of the survival in Prussia of a mediaeval polity, based on the divine right of kings, served by a feudal aristocracy and capable of employing all the arts and sciences of modern life to serve its ends, had not dawned upon him. He was too wise, however, to claim oracular powers, and upon his own confession the history of his own country was full of unexpected disenchantments. 'I set myself', he wrote after the revolution of 1848, 'to retrace in my memory the history of the last sixty years, and I smiled bitterly as I thought of the illusions which accompanied each stage of this long revolution, the theories on which these illusions were nourished, the learned dreams of our historians, and all the ingenious and erroneous systems with the aid of which men had tried to explain a present which was not yet clearly seen and to predict a future which was not seen at all.'

Another error not confined to any one country or to any one school of political thought, has been the common assumption that democracy inevitably desires

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Correspondence*, ii. 35.



democratic legislation. Up till the Franchise Act of 1917, all the Reform Bills in this country have been violently attacked and energetically advocated upon this erroneous assumption. Yet, though eighty-six years have passed since the first Reform Act, there is still a great fund of conservative policy in the country. The House of Lords is in being, the Anglican Church holds its own, and the Tory party has enjoyed its fair share of office. Experience has shown that few speculations are so uncertain as those concerning the probable consequences of an extension of the franchise, nor was there any more remarkable feature of the franchise debates of 1917 than the abandonment by tacit consent of this ancient field of contentious augury and gratuitous error.

Nor has History been kind to those thinkers who, standing in the main line of the English liberal tradition, too hastily assumed that the world was passing out of a military into an industrial stage. The first apostles of Free Trade judged aright the economic consequences likely to flow from the adoption of their policy, but were disposed to exaggerate the influence of economic exchange as a factor making for peace. Closer intercourse, while it is a condition of friendship, is also a cause of friction, and the first result of the Commercial Treaty of 1860 between England and France was the outburst of a storm of indignation against this country in the forests and factories of our present Ally. It was reasonable to hope with Michel Chevalier that the development of the railway system in Europe would 'remove hereditary animosities and firmly cement nation to nation in a lasting peace'. But has this

prediction been fulfilled? A few years after it was uttered Von Moltke and Roon were giving the world the first demonstration of the scientific use of railway power in modern war.

The union of the German States under the hegemony of Prussia had been foretold so often that many sagacious minds were doubtful whether, in fact, it could ever be realized. Lord Robert Cecil, who, as Lord Salisbury, was destined to rule in our Foreign Office for many years, contended in a *Quarterly* article on the Danish duchies, written in 1864, that Germany would never be united. Such a view was by no means foolish or fantastic. For centuries the most prominent fact in European politics had been the disunion of Germany and the rivalry of her warring States. One short-lived movement towards union had been crushed in 1815; another, more recent and more determined, had broken down in a calamitous failure in 1849. It was not, therefore, unreasonable to imagine that the obstacles, which had prevailed for several centuries, would be sufficiently strong to avert union even four years before union was, in fact, accomplished, and, indeed, it is probable that anything short of the very surprisingly rapid success of the Prussian army in the campaign against Austria would have involved the whole Prussian project in uncertainty.

Posterity should not be too hard on statesmen if, in order to meet the urgent necessities of the moment, they consent to arrangements which, later on, under altered conditions, are found to be prejudicial. All political decisions are taken under great pressure, and if a treaty serves its turn for ten or twenty years, the

wisdom of its framers is sufficiently confirmed. In view of the great period of rivalry between the British and German Empires which has opened out since 1890, it seems to argue a strange lack of foresight in British statesmen that they should have promoted the cession of Rhenish Provinces to Prussia in 1815 and of Heligoland in 1890. Yet each transaction is defensible in the light of the general system of foreign policy which this country was pursuing at the time, the first when we reflect upon the danger which Europe had experienced from the ambition of Napoleon and upon the assumed necessity of erecting a powerful bulwark against the repetition of any French scheme of aggrandizement, and the second (though here the defence is far weaker) when it is recalled that it was then the established policy of Lord Salisbury's Government to maintain cordial relations with the German Empire, that the growth of a powerful German Navy was not suspected, and that a set-off to the cession of Heligoland was supplied by the acquisition of Zanzibar.

It is, however, remarkable how little the military strength of Prussia was appreciated at its true value in the decade preceding the Franco-Prussian War. 'The Prussians', wrote Lord Palmerston in 1863, 'are brave and make good soldiers, but all military men who have seen the Prussian Army at its annual reviews of late years have unequivocally declared their opinion that the French would walk over it and get without difficulty to Berlin.' A year later Disraeli, who was even more fundamentally misinformed, declared, 'Prussia is a country without any bottom, and in my opinion could not maintain a war for six weeks'. When, two years

later, war did break out between Prussia and Austria, it was the universal expectation, even in the best instructed circles of Germany, that the war would be long and sanguinary. Mohl, the Württemberg jurist, expected it to last for a generation; Hohenlohe, the Bavarian statesman, looked forward to protracted campaigns. Even the rapid victory of the needle gun in Bohemia did not unseal the eyes of Europe. When the war of 1870 broke out, Delane wrote to W. H. Russell: 'Nothing shall ever persuade me except the event that the Prussians will withstand the French, and I would lay my last shilling upon Casquette against Pumpernickel.' Such was the wisdom of the editor of the leading newspaper of the world.

The acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine by Prussia in 1871 was at the time regarded by Bismarck with just misgiving; but he allowed himself to be overborne by the soldiers. The consequences of this unprincipled act of spoliation were, however, foreseen, even in Germany, more particularly by Karl Marx, who predicted at the time that France would be thrown into the arms of Russia, and that the robbery would bring upon Germany a racial war against the united power of the Slavs and the Latins. Never has a prophecy been more exactly fulfilled.

That war is full of surprises is a maxim as old as Thucydides, and there has never been a war which has not brought confusion to the prophets. Many years before the great storm broke, in August 1914, Europe had been uneasily conscious of gathering clouds, and a whole literature had grown up about the impending conflict. Yet the attitude which Great

Britain and Italy would adopt upon the outbreak of hostilities between the German Powers and the Dual Alliance was quite uncertain, and few people before 1898 predicted that Turkey would be ranged on the side of the Central Powers. Moreover, the entry of America into the War, by far the most important occurrence of our age, was, so far as I am aware, entirely unforeseen by any of those numerous thinkers who concerned themselves with speculations as to the immediate political future of the world. It was as unforeseen in America as it was in Europe, and this on many grounds of political tradition and racial mixture: but the unforeseen has come to pass.

On the other hand, some leading military and economic features of the world struggle were divined as early as 1898 by a sagacious Polish banker, who applied a trained economic intelligence to the task of interpreting such lessons as might be extracted from the latest improvements in the military art. The principal data before Camille Bloch were the magazine rifle, the range-finder, smokeless powder, and the increased power and accuracy of the artillery arm. From a study of these data Bloch was led to conclude that a war waged upon a large scale between such international combinations as the Triple and the Dual Alliance would lead to a stalemate. Owing to the destructiveness of modern warfare the next war would be a war of entrenchments, in which the spade would be as indispensable to the soldier as the rifle. 'Battles', he said, 'will last for days, and at the end it is very doubtful whether any decisive victory would be gained.' The war of the future would be a long war, for there was no chance of armies running

short of munitions. Of necessity 'it would partake of the character of a siege operation, and would be brought to an end not by a military decision, in the old sense of the term, but by famine'. 'The future of war', he declared, 'is not fighting but famine, not the slaying of men but the bankruptcy of nations.' Even the victorious power would be fatally injured by the destruction of resources and the break-up of society. On the assumption that the five continental countries, comprising respectively the Triple and Dual Alliance, were engaged, he calculated that two and a half million men would be fighting, and that the total cost distributed among the combatant nations would be four million sovereigns a day.

All this furnishes an excellent example of the limits within which it is reasonable to hope that a careful and dispassionate study of economic and technical data may enable accurate predictions to be made as to the course and character of future wars. Bloch had not all the technical data before him, with which we are all now familiar, nor had he the imagination to forecast them. He knew neither aeroplane nor machine gun, neither tank nor submarine, neither gas nor gas-mask, but he had seen enough to realize that modern military science had created engines of destructiveness so greatly in excess of all previous records as to create a new problem, and he was entitled to argue that any future developments of the military art would only aggravate the general tendency which he had set himself to explore.

In the event his forecast of the future course of the present war was more correct than that of the German Higher Command; but it might easily have been other-



wise, and, as an exhaustive statement of the possibilities of the case, his ingenious volumes are clearly defective in that they omit to consider the possibility of a sudden collapse of one of the combatant nations either owing to military mismanagement or to failure of the popular nerve. On the economic side, again, Bloch failed to pay adequate regard to the stimulus which war imparts to industrial inventiveness, organization, and economy. In common with all other political reasoners, he failed to predict the part which women might be made to play in modern war and in the industries on which modern war is nourished, and in a hundred other particulars history has refused to substantiate his predictions. Nevertheless, to him belongs the credit of pointing out for the first time a fact of surpassing importance, the significance of which we have only just begun to realize, that as the destructiveness of armaments increases, the rate of destruction diminishes until the cost of a slain enemy reaches a figure which is not only uneconomic but ruinous. In a graphic way he said that war was impossible, by which he meant, not that war would not be waged in future, but that the old-fashioned, chivalrous, swift, and decisive war, the *frisch-fröhlicher Krieg* of the egregious Crown Prince, was henceforward an affair of the *ancien régime*, an historic curiosity.

Narrow the problem of war to one or other of its technical aspects, and the chances of an accurate prediction are increased. The forecast of the Blue-Water School that this island could not be successfully invaded from the sea is a triumphant exemplification of accurate reasoning within a limited sphere governed by considerations capable of accurate measurement. So, too, was

Admiral Sir Percy Scott's forecast of the part which the submarine was destined to play in naval warfare. As soon, however, as the question is extended beyond the possibilities contained in this or that application of military or naval power to a survey of the future of war in general, with all the moral and psychological imponderables, the possibilities of error become infinitely greater. In this sphere the imaginative historian is more likely to hit the mark than the encyclopaedic statistician. Travelling through the clouds, he may, nevertheless, find the goal. Renan, writing in September 1870, under the shadow of a great military disaster, argued that in the next war, which would be a war of races and therefore of extermination, England would be found on the side of France. The reason which he advanced was a poet's reason. We were steadily becoming, like France, more Celtic and less Germanic in our general outlook upon life. 'France', he writes, 'is one of the conditions of English prosperity. England is every day becoming more Celtic and less Germanic in virtue of that great law which ordains that the primitive race of a country eventually asserts its supremacy over all the invasions. In the great struggle of races England is with us. The alliance of France and England is founded for centuries. Whether we think of the United States, of Constantinople, or of India, England will see that she has need of France and of a strong France.'

These are remarkable words. Renan had a clear sense of the mediaeval character of Prussian militarism and of the danger which it opposed to the democratic countries of the West. At the same time he had been



impressed by the quality of contemporaneous English literature, and more particularly by the Free Trade philosophy which had led to the commercial treaty between England and France in 1860. He felt instinctively that in all this there was something utterly alien to the Prussian spirit, and that the collision of ideals would lead one day to the clash of arms. The opposition between English ways and Prussian, which was so present to the minds of Bismarck and Treitschke, seemed to Renan, who knew so much less but divined so much more, to be one of the great facts which would dominate the future of Europe. So, while Moltke's guns were booming, he foretold the ultimate opposition of the British and the German Empires, and at the same time, with the pre-science of genius, discerned the unsound quality of the new German Imperialism. I cannot deny myself the pleasure of a quotation from the *Nouvelle Lettre à Strauss*, written in 1871, with the exquisite measure and delicacy of which Renan was a master: 'Excess of patriotism injures those works of universal significance which are grounded in the words of St. Paul: *Non est Iudaeus neque Graecus*. It is just because your great men eighty years ago were not too patriotic that they opened out that large way wherein we are their disciples. I fear that your ultra-patriotic generation, repelling as it does everything which is not purely Germanic, is preparing for itself a more restricted audience. Jesus and the founders of Christianity were not Germans. Your Goethe recognized that he owed something to that corrupt France of Voltaire and Diderot. Let us leave these narrow fanaticisms to the lower regions of opinion. Permit me to say it, you have declined.'

Two forms of oracle we shall always do well to examine with special care, those which proceed from the advocate and the pessimist. When has a measure been defended without confident asseveration of golden consequences which have never ensued, or attacked without predictions of evil which experience has refused to endorse? No one was more closely concerned with the inner history of working-class radicalism during the first decade of the nineteenth century than Francis Place, the Westminster tailor. Yet he prophesied that the repeal of the combination law of 1800 would put an end to Trades Unions. Anxiety to secure support for the removal of an odious statute, coupled with a dislike of Trades Unions as obstacles to individual liberty, led him to express a belief calculated, indeed, to assuage the anxieties of his opponents, but destined to be completely overthrown by the realities of subsequent history. Nor are Education Ministers always infallible. W. E. Forster, the creator of our English Board Schools, prophesied that the education rate would never exceed 3*d*. What must his ghost be thinking, if it should ever take upon itself the curious fancy of visiting the debates of the local authority of West Ham when Mr. Will Thorne, in a voice of thunder, is expounding the educational finance of the area? I will not pursue so painful a topic. In general it is wise for the fighting politician, even if he be eminent in letters, to eschew predictions with respect to causes which he has at heart, unless he is careful to adopt language of the vaguest and most general description. Ten years ago it was confidently asserted by one of our most brilliant living Englishmen that Australians could never be reconciled

to paying for a war undertaken for the defence of Belgian neutrality.<sup>1</sup> At the time when the words were written the chances seemed a thousand to one against a disproof of such a proposition being afforded within a generation. Yet the very thing, which was cited in disparagement of Seeley's outlook on contemporary history, has, in fact, been brought to pass.

If the verdicts of our best men are very fallible, even when they are dealing with the prospects of a civilization which they know, how much more fallible are our estimates of the mysterious East? If we exclude the prescient anticipations of Brinkling and Oliphant, what western statesman or publicist can claim to have foretold in the sixties the rise of Japan? How few, even with the evidence supplied by the Chinese students who frequented the universities of America, predicted the establishment of a Republic in China? We judge the East by India, and we judge India by a series of maxims, the deposit of a long but narrow official experience, which are fast becoming obsolete. Even in the Near East how often have our prophecies been brought to naught from the days when Dr. Lloyd,<sup>2</sup> 'the present most learned Bishop of Worcester, who has now for above twenty years been studying the Revelations with an amazing diligence and exactness', predicted that the peace between the Turks and the Papal Christians was certainly to be made in the year 1698. The Turk, whose empire has been partitioned on paper more than a hundred times, and whose expulsion from Christian territory has been constantly predicted, even

<sup>1</sup> Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, vol. iii.

<sup>2</sup> Burnet, *History of his own Time*, ii, p. 204, 1697.

by those who, like Wilfrid Blunt, had most sympathy for Islam, still remains in Constantinople, and when these lines were written was especially protected by a Power whose interest in Balkan problems was nowhere anticipated until the last decade of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the Government of the Ottoman Empire is in the hands of men who raised themselves to power by a revolution which no one foresaw and which every one misjudged.

It is equally safe to distrust the pessimist. The prophet who foretells the degeneracy of his race may be doing a useful service in his day, but he is almost always convicted by the searchlight of to-morrow. A Cambridge pedant once published a lament over the degeneracy of England, but the sheets were hardly dry from the press before the conquests of Wolfe and Clive laid the foundations of the British Empire. The jeremiads of Robert Lowe and Thomas Carlyle are pretty reading, but after all we have 'shot Niagara' and are still a flourishing people, not altogether devoid of valour, faith, endurance, charity, and other estimable qualities of hand and heart: nor, so far as we can see, is the race of heroes entirely extinct upon this planet.







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